

Sri Lanka rebels capture new towns in assault. (1999, November 18). *The Focus.*

11/18 0845 FOCUS-S.Lanka rebels capture new towns in assault

(Adds defence ministry statement in para 7-8)

COLOMBO, Nov 18 (Reuters) - Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels captured fresh territory in the country's north on Thursday as heavy fighting ended a short lull in the ethnic war, military officials said.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) took the northwest town of Palampiddy in the Wannu region after heavy fighting, they said, adding that the army had retreated south in the face of heavy attack.

The LTTE said in a statement from its London office that its guerrillas had overrun the military complex at Palampiddy before capturing the town of Periyamadu, in Mannar district, inflicting heavy casualties on the military.

"Supported by artillery and mortar fire, the LTTE fighting units stormed the forward defence lines of the Sri Lankan military base at Palampiddy and overran the entire military complex after several hours of intense fighting," it said.

Palampiddy lies about 30 miles (48 km) west of the government-held frontier town of Vavuniya.

"Following the fall of the military complex, the LTTE fighters recovered a huge quantity of arms and ammunition including armoured cars, armoured personnel carriers," the statement added.

A defence ministry statement said that heavy fighting had broken out in areas around Palampiddy early on Thursday and there was a fierce exchange of artillery fire from both sides.

"Ground troops confirm approximately 33 terrorists were killed and a large number wounded due to the confrontations. Thirty-six security forces personnel have been injured," the statement said. It did not say whether any soldiers had died.

REPORTS OF CAPTURED CATHOLIC SHRINE

Residents in northwest Mannar said rebels had also captured Madhu, home to a famous Catholic shrine. But the LTTE statement only said the area where the shrine was located was surrounded.

Madhu also lies to the west of Vavuniya, which fell to government forces earlier this year.

This month, most of the army's key bases in Wannu were lost to the guerrillas in a matter of days in one of the biggest debacles for the military in the 16-year-old war.

The military had taken more than two years to capture that area.

The LTTE had last week threatened to attack Vavuniya, some 220 km (136 miles) northeast of the capital, Colombo, and asked tens of thousands of its residents to flee.

Residents said the LTTE had fired several artillery shells towards Vavuniya on Thursday, but were unable to give details of damage or casualties.

"There has been a lot of shelling, but we don't know what is happening," said a Vavuniya resident by phone.

"Some 300 people have taken shelter in the church," Father T. Navaratnam, Vavuniya's parish priest told Reuters, adding that people were scared and nobody knew the exact situation.

Thousands of people began returning to Vavuniya on Wednesday after the rebels withdrew their threat and asked them to come back.

The rebels have been fighting for a separate homeland for minority ethnic Tamils in Sri Lanka's north and east since 1983. More than 55,000 people have